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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 04372

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SUBJECT: SIDON: ANOTHER "WAR OF THE CAMPS" IN THE OFFING?

REF: DAMASCUS 4580

1. CONFIDENTIAL - ENTIRE TEXT.

2. SUMMARY AND INTRODUCTION. SIX WEEKS AFTER ISRAEL ANNOUNCED THE COMPLETION OF ITS MILITARY WITHDRAWAL FROM SOUTH LEBANON, THAT REGION REMAINS TENSE AND UNSETTLED. ALTHOUGH RELIABLE, FIRST-HAND REPORTS ARE SPARSE, IT SEEMS CLEAR THAT POTENTIALLY EXPLOSIVE SITUATIONS CONTINUE TO PREVAIL IN SIDON AND JAZZIN. TROUBLES LINGER ALONG THE BORDER STRIP BUT APPEAR TO HAVE DIMINISHED.

3. IN SIDON, INCREASED FEARS OF AN OPEN CONFLICT INVOLVING PRO-ARAFAT PALESTINIANS, THE PNSF, AMAL, LOCAL MUSLIM MILITIAS, AND PERHAPS THE PSP HAVE LED TO SYRIAN-SPONSORED EFFORTS TO HEAD OFF ANY SUCH SHOWDOWN AND TO AVERT ANOTHER "WAR OF THE CAMPS." MEANWHILE, SYRIA IS REPORTEDLY BOLSTERING THE AMAL MILITIA WITH ADDITIONAL EQUIPMENT AND TRAINING, PROBABLY BECAUSE OF DOUBTS ABOUT THE STEADFASTNESS OF ITS OTHER ALLIES.
END SUMMARY AND INTRODUCTION.

4. THE LOCAL PRESS AND MOST OF OUR LEBANESE POLITICAL CONTACTS ARE REplete WITH STORIES THAT TENSIONS ARE ESCALATING IN SIDON. THESE STORIES ARISE, IN PART, FROM REPORTS THAT PLO LEADER ARAFAT IS REINFORCING HIS LOYALISTS IN THE THE AYN AL-HILWAH AND MIYAH MIYAH REFUGEE CAMPS AND IN SIDON PROPER WITH ADDITIONAL MEN AND MATERIEL. ALTHOUGH WE CANNOT CONFIRM OR QUANTIFY THESE REINFORCEMENTS, THE LEADERS OF SIDON ARE, WE HEAR, EXTREMELY EDGY" ABOUT THE ESCALATING TENSIONS THERE AND THE PROSPECTS FOR A FLARE-UP SIMILAR TO THE "WAR OF THE CAMPS" IN BEIRUT.

5. ACCORDING TO LOCAL PRESS REPORTS, IN EARLY JULY, SYRIAN TROOPS IN EASTERN LEBANON FORCED THE PRO-ARAFAT "BADR BATTALION" OF THE PALESTINIAN LIBERATION ARMY OUT OF THE BIQA', WHERE IT HAD BEEN SINCE 1982, AND BACK TO JORDAN. THE PRESS ALSO CITED REPORTS FROM CAIRO THAT ARAFAT HAD PERSUADED THE GOE TO ALLOW HIM TO TRANSFER A PLA UNIT, THE AYN JALUT BRIGADE, FROM EGYPT TO SOUTH LEBANON. ON JULY 18, MUSTAFA SA'AD'S "POPULAR NASSERITE ORGANIZATION" CLAIMED TO HAVE INTERCEPTED TWO SHIPMENTS OF ARMS DESTINED FOR THE CAMPS AND TO HAVE CAPTURED THE SMUGGLERS, WHO WERE IDENTIFIED AS FOUR PRO-ARAFAT PALESTINIANS BEARING JORDANIAN PASSPORTS. IN A "RADIO MONTE CARLO" INTERVIEW, SIDON MP NAZIH BIZRI SAID THE TWO CONTAINERS OF ARMS HAD BEEN SENT FROM JORDAN VIA THE NORTHERN LEBANESE PORT OF TRIPOLI. MOST RECENTLY, ON JULY 23, AN ISRAELI NAVAL VESSEL FIRED ON AND SET ABLAZE A HONDURAN-REGISTERED FREIGHTER IN SIDON HARBOR. ALTHOUGH RELIABLE DETAILS ARE SPARSE, THE CARGO VESSEL WAS EVIDENTLY SUSPECTED OF CARRYING ARMS; ITS MOVEMENTS WERE DESCRIBED BY ISRAELI RADIO AS "SUSPICIOUS."

6. ON THE GROUND, THE RECENT ESCALATION OF TENSIONS IN SIDON HAS SO FAR BEEN CHARACTERIZED BY STILL RELATIVELY MINOR SHIA VS. PALESTINIAN CLASHES. (WE HAVE SEEN NO RECENT REPORTS OF

SIGNIFICANT CLASHES BETWEEN LEBANESE SHIA AND SUNNI IN SIDON, THOUGH ANIMOSITIES BETWEEN THEM RUN HIGH.) AMAL AND PNSF FIGHTERS CLASHED BRIEFLY ON JULY 15 WHEN THE LATTER ATTEMPTED TO REOCCUPY PREVIOUSLY EVACUATED POSITIONS NEAR AYN AL-HILWAH CAMP. OTHER AMAL-PALESTINIAN CLASHES OCCURRED THE SAME DAY NEAR BA'LABAKK AND ON JULY 21 AT THE BURJ AL-BURAJINAH CAMP IN BEIRUT. ON THE NIGHT OF JULY 22-23, SHIITE-PALESTINIAN TENSIONS ALSO SURFACED IN TYRE, WHERE AMAL FORCES ENCIRCLED BASS REFUGEE CAMP, FOLLOWING THE SHOOTING OF AN AMAL MILITIAMAN.

¶7. FACED WITH PERSISTENT SHIITE-PALESTINIAN AND BROADER SHIITE-SUNNI TENSIONS IN VARIOUS AREAS OF LEBANON, SYRIA APPEARS TO BE GOING TO CONSIDERABLE LENGTHS TO PUSH ITS ALLIES --- BOTH LEBANESE AND PALESTINIAN --- TO AVERT A REPETITION IN SIDON OF A BEIRUT-STYLE "WAR OF THE CAMPS."

¶8. FOR EXAMPLE, IN THE FINAL COMMUNIQUE OF THE SYRIAN-SPONSORED CONFERENCE OF JULY 8-9, LEBANESE MUSLIM LEADERS DECLARED THEY WOULD NOT TOLERATE THE REESTABLISHMENT OF THE PRE-1982 SITUATION IN LEBANON, WHEN THE PLO WAS VIRTUALLY A STATE WITHIN A STATE. THEY SPECIFICALLY SAID THEY WOULD NOT ALLOW THE "SEDITION" WHICH HAD PREVAILED IN BEIRUT AND ITS PALESTINIAN CAMPS TO EXTEND TO SIDON.

¶9. IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING THE DAMASCUS CONFERENCE, AND REPORTEDLY WITH SYRIAN VICE PRESIDENT KHADDAM'S BACKING, PRO-SYRIAN PARTIES ANNOUNCED A PLAN TO FORM A "NATIONAL ALLIANCE FRONT," ONE OF WHOSE OBJECTIVES WOULD BE TO AVOID FRICTIONS IN SIDON. THE FRONT WOULD INCLUDE, INTER ALIA, NABIH BARRI'S AMAL MOVEMENT, WALID JUMBLATT'S "NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC FRONT," AND THE "NATIONAL POLITICAL COUNCIL" OF SIDON, WHICH IS CHAIRED BY NAZIH BIZRI AND INCLUDES MUSTAFA SA'AD'S "POPULAR NASSERITE ORGANIZATION."

¶10. CONCOMITANTLY, SYRIA HAS REPORTEDLY BEEN TRYING TO ACHIEVE RECONCILIATION BETWEEN THE AMAL AND THE PNSF. ACCORDING TO PRESS REPORTS, KHADDAM ARRANGED A MEETING IN DAMASCUS ON JULY 9 BETWEEN BARRI AND PNSF LEADERS WHICH JUMBLATT ALSO ATTENDED. ON JULY 12, THE MAIN PRO-SYRIAN GROUPS IN SIDON --- AMAL, THE NATIONAL POLITICAL COUNCIL, THE POPULAR NASSERITE ORGANIZATION, AND THE ISLAMIC SOCIETY --- AND THE PNSF ISSUED A JOINT STATEMENT GIVING ARAFAT'S SUPPORTERS IN SIDON ONE WEEK TO LEAVE THE CITY. THE STATEMENT SPECIFICALLY BRANDED FOUR INDIVIDUALS AS "SYMBOLS OF ARAFAT'S CAPITULATIONIST POLICY": ABDEL AZIZ ABU FADAH, RAJI AL NAJMAH, HUSSEIN AL HAIBI, AND MOEMEN.

¶11. MOST RECENTLY, ON JULY 22-24, SYRIAN VICE PRESIDENT KHADDAM HOSTED A LARGE MEETING OF REPRESENTATIVES OF THE PNSF, THE NATIONAL POLITICAL COUNCIL OF SIDON, AMAL, AND THE NATIONAL DEMOCRATIC FRONT. ACCORDING TO BANNER REPORTS IN THE BEIRUT PRESS, THIS DAMASCUS MEETING RESULTED IN THE APPROVAL OF A PNSF PROPOSAL TO FORM A MIXED COMMITTEE TO "REDEFINE ON PAPER" LEBANESE-PALESTINIAN RELATIONS. AS FOR SIDON ITSELF, THE CONFEREES ADOPTED A RESOLUTION CALLING FOR (A) THE WITHDRAWAL OF ALL ARMED PALESTINIAN ELEMENTS FROM THE CITY AND A PROMISE NOT TO ORGANIZE NIGHT PATROLS IN THE SUBURBS; (B) THE WITHDRAWAL OF AMAL MILITIAMEN FROM THE SECTOR EXTENDING FROM RMAYLAH TO THE NORTHERN ENTRANCE OF SIDON; (C) THE NDF TO TAKE RESPONSIBILITY FOR MAINTAINING ORDER IN THE CITY AND CONTROLLING ACCESS ROADS, UNDER THE SUPERVISION OF THREE SYRIAN ARMY OFFICERS; AND (D) A "POLITICAL CONTROL COMMISSION" CHAIRED BY KHALID JUMBLATT AND COMPRISING NAZIH BIZRI, ANWAR FATAYRI, INAAM RAAD, AND USSAMA SA'AD.

¶12. THE MAJOR QUESTION WHICH REMAINS UNANSWERED IS WHAT THE LINE-UP WILL BE WHEN AND IF SERIOUS FIGHTING ERUPTS IN SIDON. AS NOTED ABOVE, SYRIA IS APPARENTLY PUSHING HARD FOR ITS LEBANESE ALLIES --- BE THEY SHIA, SUNNI, OR DRUZE --- AND THE PNSF TO STAND FIRM AGAINST THE PRO-ARAFAT PALESTINIANS. WE AND MANY OBSERVERS HERE, HOWEVER, BELIEVE THAT FIGHTING WOULD MOST LIKELY ERUPT BETWEEN AMAL AND THE ARAFATISTS AND THAT THE PNSF FORCES WOULD QUICKLY JOIN IN SUPPORT OF THEIR PALESTINIAN BRETHREN AGAINST THE LEBANESE SHIA. THIS SCENARIO WOULD MIRROR THAT OF THE "WAR OF THE CAMPS" IN BEIRUT IN WHICH PRO AND ANTI-ARAFATISTS COMBINED FORCES AGAINST THE SHIA.

¶13. THE ROLE OF THE SIDONESE SUNNI MILITIAS IS LESS PREDICTABLE. WOULD THEY FIGHT AS LEBANESE, I.E., WITH THE SHIA AGAINST THE PALESTINIANS? WOULD THEY FIGHT AS SUNNI, I.E., WITH THE PALESTINIANS AGAINST THE SHIA? OR WOULD THEY TRY TO REMAIN NEUTRAL? WE AGREE WITH REFTTEL THAT, FOR NOW, BIZRI AND SA'AD HAVE PERHAPS SEIZED UPON AN ANTI-ARAFATIST STANCE AS A LOW-COST WAY TO PLEASE THE SYRIANS. ONCE FIGHTING BEGINS, HOWEVER, WE ARE FAR FROM CERTAIN THAT THE SUNNI WILL CONTINUE THIS LINE. SHIITE-SUNNI TENSIONS IN SIDON, AS IN WEST BEIRUT, RUN HIGH, AND WE RECALL THAT DURING THE "WAR OF THE CAMPS" THE REMNANTS OF THE SUNNI MURABITUN MILITIA JOINED WITH THE PALESTINIANS TO MAKE NIGHTTIME RAIDS ON AMAL AND PREDOMINANTLY SHIITE LAF 6TH BRIGADE POSITIONS.

¶14. THE PSP REMAINS ANOTHER WILD CARD. AS THE "WAR OF THE CAMPS" IN BEIRUT PROCEEDED, THE DRUZE-SHIA ALLIANCE BECAME INCREASINGLY STRAINED, AND, AS FIGHTING IN WEST BEIRUT EARLIER THIS MONTH DEMONSTRATED, TENSION BETWEEN AMAL AND THE PSP CONTINUES TO RUN VERY HIGH. AN ADDITIONAL COMPLICATING FACTOR IS THAT ABOUT TWO THOUSAND SUNNI MILITIAMEN HAVE REPORTEDLY JOINED THE PSP SINCE THE DEFEAT OF THE MURABITUN MILITIA IN APRIL.

¶15. FACED WITH THE PROSPECT THAT THE SUPPOSEDLY PRO-SYRIAN PNSF, POPULAR NASSERITE ORGANIZATION, AND PSP MAY, IN FACT, SIDE WITH THE PRO-ARAFAT PALESTINIANS OR AT LEAST AGAINST AMAL, SYRIA HAS REPORTEDLY BEGUN TO REINFORCE THE AMAL MILITIA WITH ADDITIONAL EQUIPMENT AND TRAINING (SEE DATT SEPTTEL). DURING THE APRIL 16-17 "BATTLE OF BEIRUT" AND THEN THE "WAR OF THE CAMPS," THE AMAL MILITIA'S WEAKNESSES AND LIMITATIONS WERE EXPOSED. SYRIA IS NOW APPARENTLY TRYING TO BOLSTER THE STRENGTH OF ITS MOST RELIABLE ALLY.

LYNE